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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1989, President Bush and 50 state governors gathered to discuss why the American education system was failing. A major conclusion of the summit was that parents have a tremendous influence on their children's education. For change to occur in educational outcomes, parents must realize that the primary responsibility for their children's education lies with the family. In addition, American society must accept two facts about parenting: parents are responsible for child rearing, and professionals are responsible for educating parents. Community parent involvement programs are needed to support parent participation in education. A model program would train parents to conduct parent training classes in every school. Parent education programs should teach basic parenting skills to expectant parents and parents of elementary and secondary school students. Every high school should develop a family lifestyle class for students. Churches should also offer training in parenting skills, and state legislators should become involved by establishing appropriations enabling local school districts to operate parent training programs. Parent involvement programs will become a reality only when communities are ready to make a commitment to working with parents. (MM)

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PARENTS AND EDUCATORS WORKING AS PARTNERS IN 1992

by

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The topic of parents and educators as partners is a timely one, and even more so since President George Bush's speech of September 4, 1991. In a troubling back-to-school message, the President stated that the American education system is failing. "We must blame ourselves for betraying our children," the President bluntly stated.

Democratic Party Chairman, Ronald Brown, said that the President's speech was intended to open his 1992 re-election campaign and to "redeem George Bush's embarassing failure to live up to his lofty promise of our 'education president'." Interestingly, the President further pressed the delicate national issue by maintaining: "the truth is all our children are at risk...if our schools fail, we can't blame Washington. We can't blame the state capitol. We must blame ourselves for betraying our children." In closing his speech, Bush told parents that today's parents' expectations of teachers are unrealistic . "We expect our teachers to function as social workers, psychologists, and counselors."

A question comes to mind. While not intending to point fingers or assign blame to our political leaders, we ask, "What if the politicians would financially support the hiring of the counselors, social workers and psychologists needed to support teachers. To answer our own question, we are thoroughly convinced that such support staffs in our nation's schools would allow teachers time to both teach and have more time to spend working with parents.

In 1990, a random nationwide survey of 21,389 public elementary and secondary schools was conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Of the teachers who responded, a whopping 97 percent answered "yes" when asked if they had encountered in the past month any student(s) with severe family problems that were hindering the child's learning.

The subject of parenting was only a minor topic of the 203-question survey of teaching conditions and attitudes. Alarming results included the fact that educators reported only drugs (30 percent) more of a threat than parenting (28 percent). Inadequate parenting undercuts American lifestyle to a greater extent than poverty, crime, AIDS, corruption and the federal deficit and environmental desecration. One teacher's response stated: "Family life has gotten much more complicated. I think most parents mean well. But they are impeded by work schedules, they are establishing second families. The problems end up on the teachers' doorsteps."

In the Fall of 1989, President Bush and fifty state governors gathered to discuss the realities of why public school children are not making the grade. The education summit members reviewed reports which addressed the problem of low academic scores, high drop-out rates, drugs and violence. Of the many reports reviewed during the meeting, only those describing parent-teacher cooperation and innovative programs for turning kids on to learning were considered "good news" on the education scene.

A major conclusion of the summit was that parents have a tremendous influence on their children's education. For change to occur, parents must realize that they are, indeed, their

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children's first teachers and that the primary responsibility for the education of children lies with the family. Parents should share the responsibility in decisions about their children's education and participate in community organizations which have attempted to develop a model for excellence in education.

Since it is generally agreed that parents are their children's first teachers, parents must realize the importance of the first five years of education. During these initial years, it is recommended that parents teach values and provide an environment that promotes physical, emotional and intellectual development. This recommendation sounds quite simple, but many professionals forget that parents do not receive a "how-to" manual along with the birth of their child. Many parents find themselves inadequately prepared to meet the responsibility that goes hand in hand with being a parent.

The same national leaders who made the recommendations from the summit meeting are those that appropriate most of the monies into treatment (e.g., prisons and mental health facilities) rather than into early prevention programs. The bottom line is to pay now or pay later. It is a long journey from the hallowed halls of Congress in Washington, DC to the grassroots homes and schools of the American people in Anywhere, U.S.A. Thus recommendations to the National Governor's Association regarding the national education goals proposed by President George Bush are not realistic. People-type problems are solved by people getting involved in change. For example, during the 1980's, we witnessed the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) organization develop a grassroots swell that eventually had a direct effect on the serious societal problem of drinking and driving.

Following are the goals that President Bush has set for American education to reach by the year 2000:

- Graduate 90 percent of the students who enter high school
- Prepare students to lead the world in science and math skills
- Make sure students in grades 4, 8 and 12 can demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter.

To meet the new goals will take the effort of all Americans to strengthen our schools. Professionally, I do not believe these goals can be achieved until American society accepts two facts about parenting: (1) Parents are responsible for child rearing; and (2) professionals are responsible for educating parents. The author will attempt to present a "grassroots" model for a parent-school partnership that can assist communities in achieving goals described by President Bush. Can these lofty goals be reached in the next seven years?--certainly a challenging question!

As a past member of the Nevada Governor's Commission on Educational Excellence, I believe that professionals involved in parent-teacher partnerships should be interested in and aware of the Commission's first recommendations:

> School districts must develop model programs designed to achieve more parental involvement in individual schools. Such programs would include plans to:
>
> A) Expand parent-teacher conference schedules at times convenient for parents with adequate notice of the time and purpose of the conference given to parents.
>
> B) Design parent education programs to train parents to work with children in the home to reinforce the school programs.

C) Develop cooperation among business persons, community members and teachers to make readily accessible classes on child-rearing skills designed for future parents, classes which emphasize the importance of parental involvement in the educational process.

D) Initiate parent-involved programs designed to provide early intervention for handicapped and at-risk children.

Business, industry and other private and public employers are encouraged to give parents time off from work to attend parent-teacher conferences.

Recommendation by the Governor's Commission after the 1991 Nevada Legislative session continue to be just that--recommendations but are not funded programs for the 1991-1992 school year. When you speak to legislators about programs for parents, you invariably receive the same politically "pat" answer--no money.

After some quick research on the feasibility of funding parent centers, data revealed that the difference between the Governor's recommended 19-1 class reduction bill and the 16-1 eventually passed by the Legislature was $4.5 million. The State of Nevada could have funded a parent center at $100,000 for all 17 counties, with a couple of million left over to meet other educational needs. An example of success in such an educational investment has occurred in the stte of Kentucky, where the state has directed state funds into parent involvement programs and centers to the tune of creating 100 parent centers state-wide.

While the class reduction issue is one of importance, one fact cannot be ignored: Today's educational research strongly supports parental involvement far above the goal of a class reduction of 16-19 ratio. To underscore the importance of parental involvement, we must always keep in mind that children are in the school environment one-eighth of the calendar time and in the home environment seven-eights of the time.

RECOMMENDED 1993 COMMUNITY PARENT INVOLVEMENT MODEL

- Train parent trainers to conduct parent training classes in every scool.

- For grassroots parent involvement, each school will organize a Parent Teachers Association (PTA) unit to develop Parent Education and Parent Training classes. Each PTA should re-evaluate its name and change the word "Association" to "Administration," thus creating a "Parent-Teacher Administration." Rationale for this change is that parents, teachers and administrators would form a partnership to educate children. School boards and administration could be held accountable for involving parents in the education process.

- Every school will develop and set in motion a Parent Education Program to provide expectant parents and parents of infants and toddlers with:
  - information, advice and assistance
  - resource materials
  - parenting skills
  - principles of child growth and development
  - home learning
  - positive approaches to discipline
  - development of child's self-esteem.

- Every school will develop and implement a Parent Education Program to provide parents of elementary age students with basic skills for effective parenting. The program will assist

parents in creating a strong foundation for children to develop communication skills, social values/skills and self-respect. Skills will be taught to assist parents to:

- carry on daily communication with the child
- demonstrate consistent and responsible behavior
- understand child development
- know capabilities, limitations and needs of the child
- establish a positive learning environment
- know how to handle and improve behavior.

- Today's families come in many different styles and shapes. Fathers work while mothers stay home and many parents both work. There are many single parents, blended families (yours, mine and ours), unmarried couples with children and "sandwich families." Clearly, we are at the forefront of a change in the American family. To assist the changing family, we must offer a variety of parent training programs in various settings. For example, the workplace could offer "Lunch and Learn" parenting classes, sessions to be set up as a partnership between school district and employer. School districts could provide trained instructors to conduct workshops in the workplace.

- One of the most important aims of the model is to have every high school develop a family lifestyle class for students which would address the pros and cons of different family make-ups in the1990's. The class could give prospective (and some who are already) parents a much-needed manual to help them through the challenges, issues and rewards they will face in their life-time endeavor. The goals of the program would be to provide teenagers with a realistic picture to the responsibilities of raising a child in the 1990's.

- Churches should offer specific training in developmental, emotional, physical and social skills. The classes should follow the Lamaze-type classes and continue through adolescent-age years. Family lifestyle classes (e.g., single-parent, blended and "sandwich" families) should be conducted in the church setting.

- When politicians are seeking office, from the President of the United States to local city officials, they preach about how we need parent involvement. After elections, other issues seem to have a priority for funding. It is a known fact that preventive-type programs are not sufficiently funded. For the recommended Parent Involvement Model to become a reality, state legislators should establish appropriations to enable local school districts to write grants for development and operation of a Parent Education or Parent Training Program.

Of note is the fact that the State of Missouri is presently funding a successful program called "Parents as First Teachers." In closing, the bottom line is that parent involvement programs will become a reality when communities are ready to make a commitment to working with parents.